

Symbolism of the Paper Lantern

In *A Streetcar Named Desire*, a Chinese paper lantern is used to symbolize a main character's own insecurities. Some would see the paper lantern as just a prop in this play but it is actually a reflection of how Blanche, the haughty and mysterious sister, really feels on the inside. Like Blanche, the Chinese paper lantern is used to cover something that was not so appealing. Blanche buries her insecurities in lies and cheap fashion so that she may appear more attractive to others. The paper lantern is an important symbol of Blanche because it simplifies all of her imperfections onto, literally, a piece of paper. All it took for the naked light bulb to be enticing was to cover it up with a cheesy paper sack, "and lo and behold the place has turned into Egypt" (10; 2241). This quote from Stanley helps support the symbolism of the lantern because it captures the wool that Blanche is always trying to pull over everyone's eyes. She is a greedy slut who is trying to appear as a southern belle but Stanley has ripped off the paper lantern and exposed Blanche for what she really is. To Blanche, telling the truth is only necessary fifty percent of the time. She would prefer to appear as something she is not just to please others and if lying gets her there, then she is willing to do it. The paper lantern enters the play just as a prop but grows into becoming the most important symbolic element of *A Streetcar Named Desire*.

Literally, a lantern is a case made out of glass, plastic, or paper that is used to protect a light. In this case, Blanche purchases a Chinese paper Lantern which is normally cheap, collapsible, sphere-or cylinder-shaped, and can come in a variety of colors. Its only purpose is to be a decorative piece to some source of light. As to why she bought the lantern: "I can't stand a naked light bulb, any more than I can a rude remark or vulgar action" (3; 2207). The Chinese paper lantern that Blanche chose to purchase symbolizes the idea that Blanche believes she can cover up anything and make it appear more beautiful and tantalizing. Not only has Blanche chosen to transform a bare light bulb into something more eye-catching, she has chosen to live her life the same way—by constantly reinventing herself. Unfortunately, if the paper lantern collapses then all that is left is just a light bulb and that is what happens to Blanche when she collapses. She is left vulnerable and empty because she cannot even recognize herself. Like a light bulb, most people can see right through her and if

shaken or dropped, she could shatter into a million pieces. In order to protect her delicate state, she covers herself with something that will make her appear less frail and more interesting.

Even after Blanche states why she needed the paper lantern, the symbolism is still a mystery until Blanche learns that there are rumors circulating about her. Blanche uses the paper lantern to describe herself in an intriguing plea:

I never was hard or self-sufficient enough. When people are soft—soft people have got to shimmer and glow—they’ve got to put on soft colors, the colors of butterfly wings, and put a—paper lantern over the light. . . . It isn’t enough to be soft. You’ve got to be soft *and attractive*. And I—I’m fading now! I don’t know how much longer I can turn the trick. (5; 2217)

Even if Blanche does not realize it, she is comparing herself to being the light bulb and using a paper lantern as a cover up. She is fully aware of her alternating personality and how she is using it to impress other people. Blanche feels that in order for someone to like her, she has to act like someone she is not. Like the light bulb, she is soft and glowing but, at the same time, she is extremely vulnerable and fragile. To protect herself, she covers up with fake stories and extensive lies to appear more attractive. To Blanche, beauty is not what is on the inside. When asked by her sister why she is so sensitive about her age, she replies, “Because of the hard knocks my vanity’s been given. What I mean is—he thinks I’m sort of prim and proper, you know! [*She laughs out sharply.*] I want to *deceive* him enough to make him—want me . . .” (5; 2218). Instead of just letting herself shine, she is using a paper lantern to appear as something more vibrant and young. The lantern is masking the blandness of the light bulb just as Blanche is using her clothes and makeup to mask her age because she does not want Mitch, her new beau, to discover her real age.

Blanche is self-conscious about her inner and outer self so she chooses to hide behind her lies and remain in the dark. When Mitch wants to see her face in the light she says, “I like it dark. The dark is comforting to me” (9; 2235). Blanche prefers to be in the dark because then she is not exposed and Mitch cannot see her aging appearance. She wants to hide in the dark and be covered up and masked so that no one, including Mitch, will see her true self. As Mitch starts to hear the gossip about Blanche, he is curious to see her in the light—both physically and introspectively. When he tries to, ironically, turn on the light with the Chinese paper lantern Blanche exclaims, “I don’t want realism, I want magic! [*MITCH laughs.*] Yes, yes, magic! I try to give that to people. I misrepresent things to them. And if that is sinful, then let me be damned for it!—*Don’t turn the light on!*” (9; 2236). Who Blanche really is remains a mystery to all because she is constantly reinventing herself to please somebody. What is ironic is that she wants Mitch to see this young, innocent woman

but she confesses that she does like to “misrepresent things.” For some reason, Blanche thinks she is pulling the wool over everyone’s eyes; she likes to make believe and tell ‘little white lies,’ but she would never lie to that person directly. In reality, she has lied to every single person she has met while visiting her sister, so it can be said that Blanche’s paper lantern comes in every size, shape, and color. She is always molding herself to become what she thinks the other person wants.

Blanche sums up her accommodating personality with this one line to Mitch: “I’m very adaptable—to circumstances” (3; 2207). Again, this supports the idea that Blanche is willing to become anyone just to please someone or a group of people. Like the paper lantern, Blanche can make herself fit into any room with any kind of scenery. No matter the group she is with or the person she is dating, Blanche will find a way to make them want her. Strikingly, Blanche does not see anything wrong with how she perceives herself. She is fully aware of what she is doing and is kind of shocked when someone calls her out. Blanche is comfortable saying, “A woman’s charm is fifty per cent illusion. . .” (2; 2200). She is not going to hide the fact that she will do mostly anything to get a man’s attention except, “when a thing is important. . .” (2; 2200). Because why would being yourself matter to a man? He does not need to know who you really are, right? Blanche obviously does not find that kind of thing very important. She would probably prefer a group of guys wanting the seductive Blanche instead of one guy wanting the real Blanche.

As much as Blanche wants to be accepted by everybody, her brother-in-law named Stanley, sees right through her act. Throughout *A Streetcar Named Desire*, Blanche is portraying herself as something she is clearly not. She is a bare bulb shaded by the decorative lantern, but Stanley is not fooled and confronts Blanche:

I’ve been on to you from the start! Not once did you pull any wool over this boy’s eyes! You come in here and sprinkle the place with powder and spray perfume and cover the light-bulb with a paper lantern, and lo and behold the place has turned into Egypt and you are the Queen of the Nile! Sitting on your throne and swilling down my liquor! I say—*Ha!*—*Ha!* Do you hear me?—*Ha—ha—ha!* [*He walks into the bedroom.*] (10; 2241)

Stanley is calling Blanche out on her efforts to convince everyone that she is something she is not. Blanche tries to cover up *everything* to make it appear more glamorous, but Stanley sees past the clothes and décor and has had enough of the lies. To Stanley, those sorts of items do not make a person special because all they do is cover up the truth and turn it into something it is not. Stanley prefers just the bare light bulb or the naked truth and Blanche is the complete opposite of all that. While Blanche hoped that her ‘fancy’ possessions and

cover ups would impress Stanley and his wife, they ended up collapsing all around her and left her feeling alone and weakened.

By the end of the play, Blanche's paper lantern has been removed and the real Blanche is exposed. She has been allegedly raped by Stanley and is left feeling more insecure than ever before. The confident, mysterious Blanche has been tucked away and all that is left is a lonely, desolate woman. When she is leaving her sister's apartment to go to a mental institution for her odd behavior, she insists she forgot something. Stanley stops her and says, "You left nothing here but spilt talcum and old empty perfume bottles—unless it's the paper lantern you want to take with you. You want the lantern?" (11; 2247). He rips the paper lantern off the light bulb and when he hands it to Blanche, "*She cries out as if the lantern was herself*" (11; 2247). Coincidentally enough, when Blanche looks at the paper lantern, she screams as if she sees her own reflection. The paper lantern is a symbol of Blanche's behavior because it is strictly used to become a decorative piece for an old, shabby light bulb. It is a material object and when it collapses or is taken away, all that is left is a naked, boring bulb; just as Blanche is left looking like a worn down, aging widow.

For a prop like a Chinese paper lantern to play such an important role, it would almost seem like its symbolism was imagined. When the purpose of such a lantern describes a main character so perfectly, it makes it hard not to see the connection between the two. Like the lantern, Blanche is extremely fragile and the only way she knows how to protect her frail state is by covering it up. When Stanley pulled the Chinese paper lantern off the light bulb, he also pulled off Blanche's paper lantern. Blanche had concealed herself in an attractive façade but in reality it was a cheap, decrepit, paper sack which was ripped off by a man who could see right through it. Like the paper lantern, Blanche was trying to cover up her aging body and sinful ways with a more elegant appearance that would charm people. In the end, the paper lantern was removed and Blanche was left helpless and alone.

Works Cited

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